DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 116 792 PS 008 245

AUTHOR Mischel, Walter; Mischel, Harriet N.
TITLE Moral Behavior from a Cognitive Social Learning Viewpoint.
PUB DATE 10 Apr 75
NOTE 14p.; Paper presented at the Biennial Meeting of the Society for Research in Child Development (Denver, Colorado, April 10-13, 1975)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.76 HC-$1.58 Plus Postage
DESCRIPTORS Cognitive Ability; *Cognitive Development; *Cognitive Processes; Empathy; *Moral Development; *Moral Values; Predictive Validity; *Reinforcement; Social Influences
IDENTIFIERS *Cognitive Social Learning; Role Taking

ABSTRACT

This paper deals with one view of cognitive social learning and its applications to the psychological analysis of moral competence and moral conduct. The concept of cognitive and behavioral construction competencies is explained and cognitive competencies are said to be among the very best predictors of "honesty" in conduct. Moral competence includes the ability to reason about moral dilemmas, the skill of role-taking, and the kind of empathy required to take account of long-term consequences of actions as they affect other people. Although an individual may be capable of moral conduct, his decision on whether to act morally at any given time depends on his behavior-outcome expectancies. The young child's behavior is governed primarily by expected immediate, concrete consequences for himself, but as he matures the evaluation and reinforcement of his behavior become increasingly independent of external rewards and punishments and include more temporally distant and abstract considerations and self-reactions. It is thus concluded that age-related changes in the style and content of moral reasoning and conduct reflect changes in the individual's cognitive and verbal capacities in interaction with the social learning variables salient for him at different points in the life cycle. (JMB)

****
* Documents acquired by ERIC include many informal unpublished *
* materials not available from other sources. ERIC makes every effort *
* to obtain the best copy available. Nevertheless, items of marginal *
* reproducibility are often encountered and this affects the quality *
* of the microfiche and hardcopy reproductions ERIC makes available *
* via the ERIC Document Reproduction Service (EDRS). EDRS is not *
* responsible for the quality of the original document. Reproductions *
* supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made from the original. *
****

ED116792

[Paper Presented at SRCD Meetings, Symposium on Morality: New Directions and Enduring Issues, April 10, 1975, Denver.]

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY.

Moral Behavior from a Cognitive Social Learning Viewpoint

Walter Mischel Harriet N. Mischel

Stanford University

We want to consider, albeit very briefly, some of the main constructs of a cognitive social learning position (Mischel, 1973) and examine how they apply to the psychological analysis of moral judgments and moral (prosocial) conduct.

Human beings not only generate behaviors but also categorize, evaluate, and judge them. Thus a comprehensive psychological analysis of "morality" must consider judgments about what is moral as well as the determinants of moral behavior itself. Moral judgment concerns the evaluation of good-bad (right-wrong, fair-unfair) and of what one "ought to do;" moral conduct (behavior, concerns the achievement of the good and the avoidance of the bad in ones actions.

In a psychological analysis of morality it is also necessary at the outset to distinguish two components: the individual's competence (capacity) to generate moral (prosocial) behaviors, and the motivational (incentive) variables for their performance in particular situations. This difference between competence and performance mirrors the basic distinction made between acquisition (learning) and performance in social learning formulations (e.g., Bandura, 1969; Mischel, 1968, 1971) as well as in linguistic theories like Chomsky's. Acquisition or learning depends mainly on cognitive-sensory processes (although it may be facilitated by incentive or reinforcement conditions). The products of acquisition are a person's competencies, that is, the repertoire of what the individual can do, and encompass what he knows, and the skills, rules, and cognitive capacities which he has acquired and

PS 008245

which permit him to generate (construct) behaviors (Mischel, 1973). In contrast, performance depends on motivational variables and incentive conditions.

First, let us consider the topic of moral competence. Later we will discuss conditions relevant to the performance of moral conduct and the achievement of self-regulation. Finally, we will mention some basic issues in the organization and inter-relations of moral judgment and of moral conduct and self-regulation.

Moral Competence

In the course of development, and by means of both direct and observational learning, each person acquires information about the world and his relationship to it. As a result of cognitive maturation and continuous social learning, the individual acquires an increasingly large potential for generating organized behavior. These acquisitions include such diverse learnings as the structure (or construction) of the physical world (e.g., Piaget, 1954), the social rules, conventions and principles that guide conduct (e.g., Aronfreed, 1968; Kohlberg, 1969) and the personal constructs generated about self and others (e.g., G. Kelly, 1955).

In cognitive social learning theory (Mischel, 1973), the concept of cognitive and behavioral construction competencies encompasses the great variety of man's psychological acquisitions and refers to the diverse cognitions and behaviors that the individual is capable of constructing. The term "constructions" emphasizes the constructive fashion in which information appears to be retrieved (e.g., Neisser, 1967) and the active organization

through which it is categorized and transformed in the course of its processing (Bower, 1970; Mandler, 1967, 1968). In sum, the concept of construction competencies is intended to emphasize the person's cognitive activities (i.e., the operations and transformations that he performs on information) rather than a residue of finite cognitions and responses that he "has" in a more passive, static sense.

Whatever "intelligence" turns out to be, it is sure to have a major role in moral competence. Cognitive competencies (as tested by "mental age" and IQ tests) tend to be among the very best predictors of "honesty" in conduct (Hartshorne & May, 1928) and of later social and interpersonal adjustment (e.g., Anderson, 1960). Cognitive achievements and intellective potential, as measured by mental age or IQ tests, are rightly being given a central role in cognitive-developmental theories such as Kohlberg's (1969) and appear to be important aspects of such concepts as "moral maturity," "ego strength," and "ego development." Indices that are strongly correlated with cognitive-intellective competence, such as age, and certain demographic variables (e.g., socioeconomic level, education), also tend to be among the best predictors of the adequacy of social functioning (e.g., Robbins, 1972). Finally, the importance of "sheer cognitive power in the operation of conscience" (Aronfreed, 1968, p. 265) is also supported by studies that have found intelligence to be significantly correlated with the complexity of the information that children can deal with in their judgments of conduct (e.g., Breznitz & Kugelmass, 1967; Keller, Pringle & Edwards, 1964; Whiteman & Kosier, 1964).

Thus, there is a triad of associations: indices of the growth of conscience tend to be correlated with independent measures of the child's intelligence as well as with his age (e.g., Abel, 1941; Johnson, 1962; Kohlberg, 1964; MacRae, 1954). In our view, age-related changes in both cognitive competencies and preferred cognitive styles may reflect age-correlated alterations in the social learning variables salient at different points in development as well as maturational changes in cognitive capacities, perhaps in almost inextricable interactions (Mischel & Mischel, 1975).

Moral competence, in our view, includes the ability to reason about moral dilemmas (for example, in the ways measured by Kohlberg). It also encompasses role-taking skills and empathy of the sort required to take account of the long-term consequences of different courses of action as they effect other people and as those other people construe them. Moral competencies seem essential elements of the sense of fairness fundamental for a conception of justice, as discussed in the theorizing of such philosophers as Rawls (1971). Empirically, while individuals certainly differ in degree of moral competence, considerable heterogeneity of both moral reasoning and moral conduct may be displayed by the same individual across different situations. From our perspective, such intra-individual differences, as well as differences between individuals, may be understood in terms of the unique social learning history that each person has experienced, and reflects the interaction of the products of cognitive development and social learning with the specifics of the immediate psychological situation in which behavior is generated.

From Moral Competence to Moral Conduct

The individual who knows how to behave competently in prosocial, constructive ways is capable of such behavior, but whether or not he enacts them at any given time (or chooses, instead, less virtuous courses of action) depends on specific motivational and performance considerations in the particular psychological situation. So far we have considered what the individual

is capable of doing, i.e., his competencies and abilities. But the same person who is capable of the most virtuous moral conduct also may be capable of aggressive and morally despicable action. To go from competence and potential behaviors to actual performance, from construction capacity to the construction of behavior in specific situations, requires attention to the determinants of performance. In this regard, the person variables of greatest interest are the individual's expectancies and subjective values.

It often helps to know what an individual <u>can</u> do, but to predict specifically what he <u>will</u> do in a particular situation, one must consider his specific expectancies about the consequences of different behavioral possibilities in that situation (e.g., Mischel & Staub, 1965). The subject's own behavior-outcome expectancies guide his selection of behaviors from among the enormous number which he is capable of constructing within any situation (Mischel, 1973). Obviously, expectations about behavior-outcome relationships depend not only on the outcomes one has obtained for similar behavior in similar situations, but also on the consequences one has observed occurring to other people. One does not have to be arrested for embezzling to learn some of its consequences, one does not have to be searched to learn of airport security arrangements and the penalty for concealed weapons, nor does one have to rescue a drowning child to discover the positive consequences of such an act. Information that alters the person's anticipations of the probable outcomes to which a behavior will lead also changes the probability that he will enact it.

From our perspective, even the noblest altruism supported by the "highest" levels of moral reasoning still depends on expected consequences, although the consequences often are temporally distant, are not in the immediate external

environment, are not easily identified, and reside in the actor himself (as in self-evaluative reactions) rather than in social agents. The young child's behavior may be governed primarily by expected immediate, concrete consequences for himself, but with greater maturity the evaluation and reinforcement of behavior become increasingly autonomous of external rewards and punishments and includes more temporally distant and abstract considerations and self-reactions on the part of the actor. But such autonomy does not imply that the behavior no longer depends on expected consequences; it does suggest that those consequences increasingly hinge on self-evaluations and self-administered outcomes contingent upon one's achieving or violating one's own standards and on more abstract, temporally distant response consequences (Mischel & Mischel, 1975). An individual who says, for example, that a particular action is wrong because it "violates universal standards of justice," or because it "goes against my conscience" is still considering the consequences of the act, but is evaluating them in more abstract terms that go beyond immediate, concrete externally administered outcomes for himself and that encompass a long temporal span (e.g., Rachlin, 1973).

The relations between socialization practices regarding response consequences and the child's age and cognitive competencies are not arbitrary; they probably reflect a continuous interaction of the child's increasing cognitive competencies with the priorities and practices of socializing agents. It is essential for a mother to prevent young Johnny from injuring his sibling, even when she does not have the time, and the child does not have the capacity to reason about the moral bases of this constraint, and therefore she must rely on specific admonitions and punishments. Her initial concern is more with everyone's survival than with an analysis of their intentions.

later in socialization, when the child's cognitive and verbal skills expand, the justification for right and wrong courses of action tends to become increasingly based on rules, first of an arbitrary, authority-oriented type but gradually of a more abstract, generalized and reasoned nature.

Consider, for example, the differences in how a 12-year-old delinquent from a lower socio-economic class family and a professor in an Ivy League college might handle moral dilemmas in ways that result in the delinquent's being assigned to stage 2 or 3 of Kohlberg's scale of moral maturity while the professor is likely to reach the higher levels. To understand the differences between these two people it is necessary to take account of the differences in their cognitive and verbal skills as well as in the ways in which moral issues and conduct are represented and treated in their respective experiences. In part, the delinquent youngster and the professor differ in the cognitive and linguistic maturity with which they can conceptualize and articulate "reasons." That is likely to be the case regardless of whether the issues about which they are asked to reason are moral dilemmas or morally irrelevant--for example, esthetic judgments about why they prefer particular paintings, books, movies or music. When justifying either his moral reasoning or his esthetic preferences (or any other choice, morally relevant or not) the professor is likely to deal in "higher" abstractions (e.g., about justice, about beauty), to invoke more generalized rules (e.g., about reciprocity in ethics, about harmony in esthetics) than will the twelve-year-old. The latter is likely to be not only more concrete but also more self-centered and peer-centered in his explanations.

Some of the differences between the juvenile delinquent and the professor partly reflect their different cognitive capacities, but it is also essential to consider the enormous differences in the consequences which they expect and value for different courses of action and for different verbalizations, and their different self-regulatory systems. For example, both the delinquent and the professor may be partly motivated by expected consequences such as the approval of their relevant peer group and their own self-esteem. But such a sense of approval and self-esteem may require strict, loyal conformity to the group's conventions for the delinquent; for the professor it may be contingent on adherence to reciprocity, consistency, and appeals to abstract universal principles. For the professor, moral reasoning oriented explicitly towards approval from others, and adherence to conventional authority, is unlikely to be rewarding, unlikely to be valued, and thus unlikely to be used. His moral reasoning will probably be structured and justified in far more impersonal, "unselfish," abstract terms, with generalizations about universal principles (which would produce a much higher "moral maturity" score). But while the particular consequences to which the professor and the delinquent are especially alert may be different, and while they may justify their choices at different levels of abstraction and verbal sophistication, both are guided by a concern with the external and self-administered outcomes expected from the available alternatives.

In sum, in the present view, age-related changes in the style and content of moral reasoning and conduct reflect changes in the individual's cognitive and verbal capacities (e.g., the ability to deal with abstract concepts) in interaction with the social learning variables salient for him at different points in the life cycle (e.g., Aronfreed, 1968).

Even when different people share similar expectancies about response consequences they may choose to enact different patterns of behavior because of differences in the subjective values of the outcomes which they expect (Mischel, 1973; Rotter, 1954). And even when subjective values for particular activities are shared, individuals may differ in how they tolerate (and respond to) deviations from those values either in their own behavior or in the conduct of others. For example, to the surprise of many sociologists, members of the lower-class (gang and non-garg) and of the middle class, both black and white, were found to endorse similar values "in principle"; but individuals from these different subcultures differed in the degree to which they tolerated behavioral deviations from the prosocial norms which they all endorsed abstractly (Gordon, Short, Cartwright & Strodtbeck, 1963), presumably due, in part, to differences in their own self-regulatory systems. Such systems are discussed next.

Tests of "moral maturity" (i.e., moral reasoning) have tended to focus on how the individual solves hypothetical moral dilemmas in story situations, but the successful realization of moral choices in real life often depends on the faithful execution of long-term commitments that demand high levels of self-control and stringent attention to the distant consequences of ones' actions. Moral conduct requires the individual to adhere to reciprocal commitments and obligations behaviorally, even (or especially) under extremely difficult conditions, and not merely to endorse them in principle. Such prolonged self-control sequences involve more than mature reasoning and judgment about justice; they hinge on the individual's ability to regulate his own behavior even in the face of strong temptations and situational pressures for long time periods and without the aid of any obvious or immediate external rewards

and supports. As noted earlier, self-control is an important aspect of morality, for without it moral ideals cannot be realized. Indeed, some philosophers suggest that all virtues are forms of self-control (Von Wright, 1963). To go from moral thought to moral conduct requires self-regulation.

Although behavior is controlled to a considerable degree by externally-administered consequences for actions, each person also regulates his own behavior by self-imposed goals (standards) and self-produced consequences. Even when there are no external constraints and social monitors, individuals set standards for themselves and criticize or commend their own behavior depending on how well it fits their expectations and standards of appropriateness and fairness (Bandura, 1971b; Kanfer, 1971; Kanfer & Marston, 1963, Mischel, 1968).

After the individual has set his standards (terminal goals) for conduct in a particular situation, the route toward their realization may be long and difficult. In that case, progress may be mediated extensively by covert symbolic activities, such as self-praise and self-instructions, as the individual reaches sub-goals en route. When reinforcing and noxious stimuli are imagined, their behavioral consequences may be the same as when such stimuli are presented externally (e.g., Cautela, 1971). These covert activities serve to maintain goal-directed work until the performance reaches or exceeds the person's terminal standards (e.g., Bandura, 1969). Progress toward goal attainment also may be aided by self-generated distractions and cognitive operations through which the person can transform the aversive "self-control" situation into one which he can master effectively (e.g., Mischel, Ebbesen & Zeiss, 1972; Mischel & Moore, 1973; Mischel, Moore & Zeiss, 1973). When important goals are attained, positive self-appraisal and self-reinforcement tend to occur, whereas the individual may indulge in psychological self-lacerations and self-condemnation if he fails to reach significant self-imposed standards.

The organization of self-regulatory behaviors also requires attention to the individual's "priority rules" for determining the sequencing of behavior and "stop rules" for the termination of a particular sequence of behavior. Prosocial, morally-relevant behaviors, like other complex human actions (moral, immoral, or neutral), depend on the execution of lengthy, interlocking sequences of thought and behavior. The concept of "plans" as hierarchical processes which control the order in which an organism performs a sequence of operations (Miller, Galanter & Pribram, 1960) seems applicable, and merits much more research attention than it has received.

Good Reasons for Justifying Bad Actions?

Although we cannot even begin to review here the empirical literature on the discriminativeness of self-control and moral behavior, in our reading it provides little support for the belief in a unitary intrapsychic moral agency like the superego or for a unitary trait entity of conscience or honesty (Mischel, 1968, 1974). Rather than acquiring a homogeneous conscience that determines uniformly all aspects of their self-control, people develop subtler discriminations that depend on many moderating variables, that involve complex interactions, and that encompass diverse components (Mischel, 1973). These components include moral judgments, voluntary delay-of-reward, resistance to temptation, self-reactions following transgression, self-evaluative and self-reinforcing patterns and many other syndromes, each of which includes further rather discrete subprocesses that tend to be only modestly and complexly interrelated, and that may be idiosyncratically organized within each individual (Mischel, 1973).

The discriminativeness of prosocial behavior and its idiosyncratic organization within each person has important social implications. It should alert us, for example, to the fact that the same individual who espouses high moral principles also may engage in harmful, aggressive actions against others who violate his conceptions of justice. Pascal's comment, "Evil is never done

so thoroughly or so well as when it is done with a good conscience" is supported by the many historical and contemporary incidents in which the individuals who committed evil deeds seemed more deficient in compassion and empathy than in moral reasoning (Kenniston, 1970).

History is replete with atrocities that were justified by invoking the highest principles and that were perpetrated upon victims who were equally convinced of their own moral principles. In the name of justice, of the common welfare, of universal ethics, and of God, millions of people have been killed and whole cultures destroyed. In recent history, concepts of universal right, equality, freedom, and social equity have been used to justify every variety of murder including genocide. Presidential assassinations, airplane hijackings, and massacres of Olympic athletes have been committed for alledgedly selfless motives of highest morality and principle. The supreme moral self-sacrifices of the Japanese suicide pilots in World War II were perceived as moral outrages by others who did not share their perspective.

People tend to be facile about justifying their own diverse actions and commitments no matter how reprehensible they may seem to others. A wide variety of self-deceptive mechanisms may be used to facilitate and excuse the most horrendous acts. Invocation of higher principles, dehumanization of victims, diffusion and displacement of responsibility, blame attribution, and the adoption of inhumane codes for self-reinforcement all may serve to maintain extraordinarily cruel aggressions (Bandura, 1973).

The extremely complex relations among diverse aspects of prosocial behavior within the same person, and the specific interactions between human conduct and the psychological conditions in which it occurs, prevent global generalizations about the "overall" nature and causes of moral--and immoral--actions. It is tempting but misleading to categorize people into the cross-

situationally moral versus the broadly immoral. A world of good guys versus bad guys, as in the Western films in which the cowboys' white or black hats permit easy identification of the virtuous versus the villainous, is seductive. More sophisticated social science versions of stratification systems that categorize people in terms of their overall level of morality, unless carefully moderated, can lead to an elitism that is empirically unjustified as well as socially hazardous. While it may be useful for some purposes to label and assess people's status on our dimensions of character and moral value, perhaps the greatest challenge to social science will be to discover the optimal conditions that can help each person realize himself in the ways he construes as best within the great range of capacities potentially open to him without violating the rights of others.